



National Disabled Veterans

Winter Sports Clinic



Skier Profile Peter Engel – Once a Snowboarder, Always a Snowboarder

"Snowboarding is one of the only physical pastimes I was ever interested in," said Peter Engel, a 23-year-old active-duty soldier from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. A couple of Army buddies got him into it when they were assigned to the 10th Mountain Division based at Fort Drum, N.Y., not too far from the slopes of Vermont.

"Sometimes, it's just the views you get from the top of the mountain," Engel said. Perhaps more often, it's the thrill of strapping yourself on and throwing yourself down a mountain. "You turn it by leaning each way, so a lot of times you'll just be riding the thin edge and throwing snow. It's a rush."

The 10th Mountain Division found themselves a long way from ski slopes and snowdrifts when the war took them to Iskandaria, Fallujah and Baghdad, in Iraq. On March 20, 2006, Engel and his platoon were working a checkpoint with Iraqi National Guard soldiers when insurgents pulled a drive-by and sprayed them with bullets. "Me and the other two guys who were in my truck got shot up pretty good," he said. "But they ended up being just fine. I was hurt the worst. I was hit in both legs."

Four days after his injury, Engel found himself at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. His left leg had to be amputated below the knee. Also, blood loss in the field deprived his brain of so much oxygen that his short-term memory was affected. "It takes me a little bit to remember a person's name even, after I've met them ten times," he explains.

Engle has heard people say that losing a leg was the best thing that ever happened to them because of the experiences that came afterward. "But I'd rather have my leg and my memory back," he said. "It wasn't a good time in my life."

Capt. Marilyn Rodgers, Engel's physical therapist at Walter Reed, knew that he liked snowboarding and put him in for a December ski trip to Colorado. "At first, I was like, 'Why the hell are you trying to sign me up for a trip? I've only got one leg!'" Engel remembers. "But that's when I was really messed up and I didn't realize that I was going to have a prosthetic leg and things like that." The experience has taught him that not everything changed the day he was shot, and that is the one thing he would tell other amputees who think the fun is over. "If there's already something you like to do, why throw it away?"

Now, Engel can't wait for the 2007 National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass Village in April. "I'm mostly right now about the snowboarding, but I'm actually kind of interested in scuba diving, too. That sounds pretty cool, and I've never done it."

According to Peter Engel, things are different now but life goes on. "I don't think it's changed me that much," he said. "All you've got to do is pretty much get over it."

Miracles on a Mountainside!